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Israeli Payment to Close the Book On '67 Attack on U.S. Navy Vessel

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 18 — The United States and Israel announced today that they had finally closed the book on one of the most divisive issues between the two countries: the Israeli air and sea attack on the American intelligence ship Liberty in 1967 that resulted in the death of 34 Navy officers and men.

The State Department said in a brief announcement that the United States had accepted Israel's proposal to settle the American claims for damage to the electronic surveillance vessel by paying \$6 million over three years.

The \$6 million will be in addition to nearly \$7 million already paid by Israel. In 1968, it paid the United States \$3,323,500 on behalf of the families of those killed and in 1969 paid \$3,452,275 for wounds sustained by 75 members of the crew.

Israel Accepts Responsibility

The incident, which took place on June 8, 1967, while the vessel was off the Gulf of Sinai during Israel's six-day war with Egypt, Syria and Jordan, has been shrouded in controversy from the start. Israel accepted full responsibility for the 80-minute attack with gunfire, torpedoes, rockets and napalm, but has maintained that it was an accident. The Israeli forces, it says, did not see the United States flag or other identification and mistook the ship for an Egyptian supply vessel.

The United States Navy, which conducted a court of inquiry soon afterwards, said that the Liberty was in international waters, "properly marked as to

her, identify and nationality," and that the attack, carried out by Israeli jet fighters and torpedo boats, had been unprovoked.

The court said that it had insufficient information to make a judgment about the reasons for the attack.

A recent book, "Assault on the Liberty," by James M. Ennis, a retired Navy officer who was one of those wounded that day, charged that the Navy court of inquiry and public statements by the United States Government amounted to what he called a cover-up.

Mr. Ennis, who was a cryptanalyst on the vessel, charged that the Government tried to cover up facts that revealed that the Pentagon had failed to protect the ship and its men and that messages ordering the Liberty out of the area were not received by the vessel in time.

In addition, Mr. Ennis said the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, in the heat of the six-day war, did not want to embarrass Israel by raising doubts about its assertion that the attack

was an accident.

"We know that the true story of the attack was covered up," Mr. Ennis wrote. "But was it covered up by habit, fear, and blind overreaction, or did a responsible American official deliberately withhold the truth?"

"We know that Israel's excuse for attacking the ship cannot possibly be true," he said, "Why has our Government not demanded a better explanation?"

Damage Claim Is Reduced

Israeli officials said today that the United States originally asked for more than \$17 million to cover damages and accrued interest for the Liberty, which was repaired but never ordered to duty again.

The Israelis said this was excessive, and shortly after the Presidential election Ambassador Ephraim Evron approached Vice President Mondale and suggested that the matter be resolved by the United States' forgiving the interest of about \$10 million and reducing the claims for damages from \$7.5 million to \$6 million.

The Israelis said that Mr. Mondale was able to win President Carter's approval for the \$6 million figure. As a result, when Mr. Evron met with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, David D. Newsom, to negotiate the claims, he learned that the \$6 million offer had been accepted.

Israeli officials again insisted today that the attack was an accident and that Israel deeply regretted it.